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(Article begins on next page)

The Semiotics of Innovation.

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“Maeterlinck uses the expression ‘The Spirit of the Beehive’ to name the powerful, enigmatic and paradoxical force that the bees seem to obey, and that the reason of man has never come to understand”

(Victor Erice, in an interview on his movie *El espíritu de la colmena* [The Spirit of the Beehive], 1973)

1. Introduction: an epiphany on the semiotics of innovation.

In 2012, at the London Semiofest, I was asked to participate in a roundtable on “How to Become a Semiotician”. Still partially jet-lagged from an overhaul flight, I sat in a Kensington Mexican restaurant during coffee break before the roundtable, and jotted a Decalogue about “How to Become a Semiotician” on the receipt of my *orchata*:

1. You shall study semiotics; choosing a good university course with a good teacher; reading books, articles, essays; going back to the classics, avoiding compendiums, readers, and also most online materials: they are not good (for the moment);
2. You shall practice semiotics; initially through purposeless analysis; through interpretation for the sake of interpretation; annoy your friends with semiotics;
3. You shall befriend other semioticians; meeting them regularly not only on the web, but also in congresses, symposia, colloquia; remember to celebrate semio-festivities;
4. You shall not turn semiotics into a rhetoric; semiotics’ purpose is to help other people to understand meaning, not to convince them that you understand it better than them;

5. You shall not turn semiotics into magic; semiotics is a discipline, one should be disciplined in learning and in practicing it;
6. You shall not turn semiotics into religion; semiotics is only one out of a multitude of options; respect other disciplines and ask respect from them;
7. You shall not turn semiotics into science; let's face it: semiotics is part of the humanities; thank god meaning will never be ruled by the laws of necessity;
8. You shall not turn semiotics into mystery; if nobody understands you but other semioticians, you are a failure;
9. You shall not turn semiotics into bar conversation; if everybody appreciates you except other semioticians, you are a failure too;
10. You shall not be worried that your mother doesn't understand what you do; most people who do new things have skeptical mothers.

To my utmost surprise, that piece became one of the most successful texts I have ever written. Saluted by rumbling applause the first time it was read, the Decalogue then became a hit on semiotics forums, generating cascades of comments and enflamed controversies that I followed with bemusement. When, encouraged by its success, I uploaded the text on my website, I soon realized, with oxymoronic proud disappointment, that it was downloaded more than any of the three hundred publications available, including scholarly essays built on rigorous research and multi-volume books whose writing had consumed my energies for years.

At some stage in life a man accepts that he is going to be remembered not for what he wants to be remembered for, but for what society mysteriously decides to remember him. Only in few cases of bliss the two mnemonic ambitions coincide. Nevertheless, as a semiotician obsessed with the laws of signification, I started wondering about the reasons for the success of the Decalogue. Some of them could be easily accounted for with reference to traditional marketing semiotics. First, my Decalogue went moderately viral because it parasitized the rhetorical form of a previous, tremendously viral text. Second, the semiotic Decalogue was short, easy to read, and relatively witty; roundtables about "How to Become Something" usually generate boring sermons on what one should or should not do; people were therefore refreshed by the unexpected parody. Third, the Decalogue took peremptory stances on some controversial issues in semiotics, such as its status among the humanities and the hard sciences; it therefore spurred debate. Fourth, the semiotic Commandments fulfilled a need: despite the publication of handbooks and the offering of courses around the

world, many anxiously feel that “becoming a semiotician” is still something as exoteric as achieving liberation from karma.

2. The semiotics of buzz.

Nevertheless, I was not completely satisfied with these reasons. Taking a more general perspective on the phenomenon, I started inquiring about what marketing experts define “buzz”. Buzz is the contagious excitement that precedes and accompanies the launch of a new product. People start talking about it, sharing information, opinions, and enthusiasm even before the new product is available, on the basis of hearsay that provides only fragmentary knowledge of what the novelty is about. Marketing experts have found that controlling buzz, through techniques that are meant to initiate, promote, and monitor it, can substantially enhance the commercialization of a product. 2.0 communication, which is reintroducing a sort of secondary orality in mass communication, offers new opportunities to control what seemed before a random phenomenon. Research and literature on buzz is therefore growing, with several articles and even a book being written specifically on the subject.

Semiotics can give a fundamental contribution to the study of this phenomenon. First, in understanding the causes of it. Why do people give and take pleasure in sharing excitement about a new product they have consumed or are about to consume? Second, in analyzing the forms of signification and communication through which buzz takes place. Third, and fundamentally, in pinpointing the mysterious dynamics of influence: why does buzz come about in certain circumstances, while in other contexts does not arise? And can this process be fostered, supervised, and controlled through hard-edged semiotic techniques?

Vice versa, the study of commercial buzz can be crucial for theoretical semiotics as well. Privileging the textual frame and the synchronic approach, semiotics, above all the structural trend, has cultivated an idea of meaning as something emerging from a comprehensive pattern, offering its unabridged fullness to the perception and interpretation of the receiver. This idea, though, based on the stereotypical scenario of the 20th-century reading of a book, corresponds less and less to the way in which consumers of texts access meaning in their everyday life. Let us consider a classical object of buzz marketing: a new book. Well before readers hold the volume in their hands, they have absorbed glimpses of its narrative, context, and meaning from websites, blogs, social networks, and conversation with friends. They have actually started talking about the new book well before they acquire it, sometimes as if they had read it. Even prior to the printing of the volume, entire groups of people have had time to grow expectations about it, in both cognitive, emotional, and

pragmatic terms, exchanging bits of anticipations and enthusiasm and declaring plans of purchase.

Then, when the book is in print, its meaning will keep arising not only from traditional reading, but also from the aura that the book will continue emanating in micro-communities. A successful book will be talked about much more than read, and its social meaning constructed through hearsay as well as through exchange among readers. Even those who will have purchased and read the book will retain only partial recollection of it — more and more subjective as the time goes — and these fragmentary meaning will add to the already piecemeal social conversation that bears on the book. In the end, only hard-core structural semioticians and few other text specialists will conceive of the meaning of the book as emerging from its integrity. For the rest of us, the book, as well as any other cultural artifact, will signify like an almost imperceptible melody surrounded by deafening buzz.

Marketers have realized that, under many circumstances, buzz is more important than melody. To continue with the musical metaphor, they have found that melody should not be preceded by absolute silence, so that the first note comes as utmost surprise to everyone. Instead, increasing buzz should pave the way for the musical piece, starting with a timid humming few privileged forerunners murmur before the product is out, thickening as the date of release approaches, exploding in thunderous drone once the product is available, and not subsiding at all after consumers purchase it, but rather accompanying its entire commercial existence.

Several reasons might account for the success of this marketing technique: researchers have pointed out that in a cultural climate where the authority of establishment messages is systematically disputed, viral advertising relying on personal connections emanates an aura of trustworthiness. I am able to sense the body that is transmitting its enthusiasm to me, therefore I can not only trust its message, but also fall under the spell of its excitement. In a way, buzz marketing exploits for commercial purposes the natural human inclination for empathy, which is also one of the controversial traits of this advertising technique. Going back to the example of the book, major US publishers nowadays do not simply acquire the manuscript, edit it, copyedit it, commission a cover, obtain a blurb from a prestigious author, and launch the new title in the market. They rather start creating buzz from the very beginning of the book's life, since the acquisition of the manuscript.

Buzz is generated through personal connections and face-to-face interactions that are nevertheless mostly simulated, staged in a way for the purpose of viral diffusion. Advanced reading copies of the book, a concept still largely unknown in continental European

publishing, are given around the country to key readers who are known to be in a position to influence other people into reading the same book. It is increasingly the case that particularly influential advanced readers, such as owners of distribution chains, indie bookshops, or managers of large reading clubs, are not simply mailed the forthcoming volume. Rather, an employee of the publishing house dispatches the book to them personally, so as to entice the key-reader into the viral network that creates buzz before the diffusion of the volume. In some special cases, even informal meetings with the author will be organized, so that key advanced readers are involved in the mission in the most personal way.

3. The semiotic ideology of novelty.

“Missionary marketing”, indeed, could be a general label encompassing several techniques of viral and buzz propaganda. The disestablishment of corporate communication in an epoch of generalized institutional crisis cannot be the only explanation for the ease by which enthusiasm for the launch of a new product is produced and produces, in its turn, buzz. A fundamental motivation for the efficacy of buzz is that we are witnessing, in this first quarter of the new millennium, not only the emergence of *prosumerism* — a more and more active participation of consumers in the shaping and choice of their elected products — but also of what could be called, with a neologism, *provertising*, a tendency in which consumers want to have a say, and an emotional rewarding, also in the advertisement and diffusion of the product. If in the first stage of interactivity consumers were given the opportunity to influence the fabrication of products, in the current stage they are granted a chance to embark in a mission for its diffusion. This passage can be effectively accounted for in narrative, Greimasian terms.

In classic advertising, the consumer was a subject upon which commercial communication would bestow the desire of acquiring a certain object. In prosumeristic advertising, the consumer was somehow invited to participate in the process that shapes the product as an object of value. In *provertising*, finally, subjects are freed from their transactional role in the sense that they are invited to play the part of what Greimas calls the addresser [*destinant*], that is, an actant whose narrative function is not that of acquiring an object, but of instilling in others the desire to do so. Anthropological motivations for which this mechanism works virally are manifold, but some of them deserve special consideration.

First, *provertisers* do not acquire value only by coming into possession of an object, in what is a classic pattern of consumption; instead, buzz victims find their identity *by creating other subjects*, that is, by showing other subjects where value is, and by inducing them to

acquire it. Narrative semiotics has traditionally focused on the subject and its passions, but has generally neglected the addresser, that is, the agency that stays at the margins of the narrative frame and that nevertheless is fundamental for its constitution. Creating desire according to one's own desire means bringing into being a relation of power between the buzz enhancer and the buzz receiver in a chain that is potentially endless and turns around the inexhaustible resource of personal enthusiasm.

4. A double-edged approach on innovation.

Depending on its context of application, the semiotic perspective on buzz can be paradoxically double. On the one hand, no discipline better than the science of signification can develop models for the creation, enhancement, maintaining, and monitoring of buzz. This entails abstract narrative models such as the one exposed above, as well as micro-analyses with a more specific focus. Given a certain product, what is its ideal buzz community? What actions can be taken so that buzz is created before the launch of the product? Using what channels and forms of old and new orality? How is it possible to synchronize the rhythm of buzz with the biography of the product, so that its melody is enhanced by the continuous drone preceding and surrounding it? Most importantly, how can one make sure that buzz generates the narrative circle of influence described above? Semiotics, tapping into all the branches and hybridizations of the discipline, can answer these questions more convincingly than any other science.

On the other hand, in its pedagogic version, semiotics cannot give up its critical stand, wondering about pluses and minuses of the cultures of buzz. Communities that rediscover the pleasure and value of personal communication, of empathically sharing inclinations and enthusiasm, must certainly be saluted with hopefulness, in an epoch where all intimacy seemed lost to the pervasiveness of mediation and simulation. At the same time, as commercialization appropriates and standardizes the new ways of tribal signification, one may wonder whether buzz is nothing but a new trap, one in which consumers are left with the empty enthusiasm for an object which does not exist yet, as they were left before, in classical consumerism, with the empty object for which enthusiasm did not exist anymore. Semioticians will better occupy the two positions, that of the marketer, and that of the skeptical observer, so as to play both roles more effectively. The development of a comprehensive semiotic theory of innovation is required to this purpose.

5. Toward a general semiotics of innovation.

Old economies sorely need innovation. Europe, for instance, sits on a tremendous cultural capital of historical heritage, service capacity, urban quality, and marketing ability, yet thriving on the past is not sufficient anymore. Globalization and the financial crisis are introducing rapid changes in the world economy, hence the necessity to swiftly adapt old products and methods to new customers and situations. More and more, Europe is forced to flexibility: toward the internal variety brought about by migration and demographic change and toward the new configurations of world capitalism and consumption. However, innovation is not easy to achieve. Whatever the field of activity involved, from cultural management to service design, from urban planning to marketing, one cannot simply rely on what is known, but must explore the unknown searching for new solutions.

Thus far, old economies have looked for innovation randomly, without applying systematic methods and specific professional skills. Indeed, engineering innovation processes is so difficult because innovation involves creativity, and creativity has been often considered as something secret and mysterious, something that you either have or do not have, something that cannot be taught and learnt. On the one hand, both hard and social sciences rarely investigate creativity, and practically do not have any model of it. On the other hand, creativity theories, popular in the 1970s, seldom meet the qualitative and quantitative standards of rigorous research. Nevertheless, old economies need innovation, and innovation needs creativity, and as a consequence old economies like Europe need a new generation of young professionals to be able to design and implement innovation through creativity in every field of activity. But how is the creativity training of future top professionals going to be possible, if no discipline seems to have solid knowledge about it?

Semiotics can play a fundamental role in satisfying the social demand of innovation and the lack of creativity training in old economies. Halfway between hard sciences and humanities, between social sciences and psychology, semiotics offers a unique point of view on creativity and innovation processes. Semiotics has already produced a great quantity of theoretical insights on creativity and innovation: Umberto Eco (the distinction between moderate and radical innovation), Jurij M. Lotman (the concepts of borders and their fecundity, the co-presence of at least two languages in every culture, the dialectics between the inside and the outside of a semiosphere — that is, culture meant as a macro pattern of signification), Louis T. Hjelmslev (the continuous variation of language forms) have all offered conceptualizations of the different modalities of creativity and innovation.

First of all, semiotics has an understanding of creativity that can be modeled, taught, learnt, and tested according to quantitative criteria. Uninterested to the romantic idea of

creativity as originating from inexplicable genius, semiotics describes creativity as a combinatorial phenomenon. Every human artifact, from the architecture of a museum to a cell phone, from a park to an advertisement, has a structure that combines certain elements and, as a consequence, produces certain meanings. Semiotics provides for theoretical frameworks, heuristic methodologies, and analytical tools, in order to 1) describe such structure; 2) model its functioning; 3) and explain how it combines the elements of a code into a signification.

But semiotics can also do much more: suggest what combinatorial possibilities of the code have not been exploited; point out what paths of meaning are still virtual; indicate what steps to take so as to turn virtuality into reality. In other words, the structural and combinatorial perspective of semiotics on meaning offers a method not only for a better comprehension of existent human artifacts, but also for the creation of innovative products. Semiotics does not have the keys of creativity, but can certainly show the right door.

Second, semiotics conceives meaning as essentially stemming from difference. Consequently, it has developed a whole series of theoretical approaches, methodological procedures, and analytical instruments in order to describe processes of differentiation. But such knowledge can be used also *to produce* difference, and therefore to foster innovation dynamics in every field of activity.

Third, semiotics bases its creativity insights not on abstract theorization, but on the empirical evidence offered by the scientific study of language. Founded on the principle that every phenomenon of human signification can be investigated as a form of language, semiotics is able to build on the extensive research carried on about creativity processes in verbal language. Exactly as the linguistic mechanism of recursion enables human beings to create an infinite number of new linguistic structures on the basis of a finite number of linguistic elements, so does innovation in every field proceeds from a recombination of known elements to the production of new results. Nevertheless, for this process to be economically effective, it has to be guided through a rigorous methodology, able to model and test potential innovation before it actually takes place. Semiotics offers such a methodology.

Third, semiotics provides a unique understanding of creativity also because it conceives it as a form of communication. In the past, many innovations, from new cultural initiatives to new media technologies, from new urban spaces to new marketing strategies, have failed because they did not take into account the audience to which they were addressed, often because such audience did not exist yet. Saying that semiotics understands innovation as a form of communication means that semiotics is able to model not only the way in which innovation is produced through combinatorial forms of creativity, but also the way in which

innovation is received depending on the sociocultural features of its audience. Future innovation professionals will require both models, since they will have to adapt their creativity to the rapidly changing consumption scenarios brought about both by the increasing internal variety of the market and by the emergence of an entire class of new buyers in new economies, mainly in Asia and South America.

This is the fourth advantage semiotics can offer to the comprehension and implementation of innovation processes. Namely through the so called “school of Tartu/Moscow”, semiotics has come up with models that describe cultures not only as static systems, but also as dynamic patterns (technically, “semiospheres”) that are constantly evolving through mutual interaction. Again, by conceiving cultures as complex languages, cultural semiotics is able to make suggestions about how such or such innovation could be received in a given sociocultural context, for instance about the impact of a new art exhibition on the Chinese audience, the introduction of a new model of phone in the Indian market, the designing of a new square in a Brazilian town, the effect of a viral marketing campaign in Russia, etc.

Fifth, semiotics offers an ideal framework for the study and the implementation of innovation heuristics also because it is quintessentially interdisciplinary. One of the main ideas in the semiotic endeavour is that through exploring unprecedented parallels between distant theories and paths of thought one can bring about novelty. Paradigm shift, as Kuhn understood it, is based on the cross-fertilization of different spheres of knowledge. Semiotics provides for a series of heuristic models able to frame and foster these cross-fertilization attempts.

Finally, semiotics is a key to creativity and innovation training because it is not only the science that study sense, but also the discipline that studies the senses, the way in which meaning is actually conveyed through a specific combination of visual, auditive, olfactory, gustative, and aptic (touch) expressive patterns. Detailed knowledge of how the five senses combine in shaping experiential environments will be more and more essential in the markets of the future, which will have to offer and sell not only products but also the experience associated with them.

Although a subfield such as “semiotics of creativity” does not exist yet, semiotics has produced a great quantity of insights on creativity when analyzing the meaning and communication structure of the most sophisticated forms of human creativity: literature, the arts, music, cinema, etc. Part of the theoretical and didactic effort of the semiotics of innovation and creativity must consist in a systematic activity of theory-mining: insights on

creativity must be extracted from the semiotic state of the art on literary and artistic creativity and remodeled in order to be injected into more general innovation processes. Practicing cross-fertilization, semiotics bids for the possibility of modeling innovation processes after the creativity patterns of the arts.

However, the semiotics of innovation does not aim only at filling a gap in the social demand of knowledge concerning creativity and innovation through theoretic systematization and teaching. On the contrary, it also aims at filling the gap between the academic study of creativity and the implementation of innovation processes in the production of goods, services, and policies. If an old economy wants to renew itself, it has to reframe its cultural capital through enhanced synergy between the theoretical study of creativity carried on in the academia and the concrete implementation of innovation processes in private companies and public agencies providing goods, services, and practices to both the local and the global audience. In order to achieve such result, the semiotics of innovation must involve a number of non-academic practitioners, mainly companies, agencies, and institutions.

6. A case study: cultural heritage in Europe.

The cultural heritage of Europe and its capacity to generate economic value are unmatched. European cities are the first destination of global tourism and attract annually millions of consumers, generating profits and employment opportunities. Yet, the management of cultural heritage sorely needs innovation too. Thus far, research and training on cultural heritage has concentrated on its *preservation*, as if the only task of cultural heritage professionals was to protect from alteration the traces of a glorious past. On the contrary, the semiotics of innovation underlines the need to train innovation professionals for the *promotion of cultural heritage* and plans to use semiotic instruments for enhancing creativity in this fundamental sector of the European economy.

First of all, semiotics takes as a point of departure that every definition of cultural heritage stems from a complex negotiation, which determines what human artifacts are attributed special value within a given sociocultural context. As a consequence, the valorization of cultural heritage is inseparable from the various narratives that build its value through reference to the past. A medieval town, an art collection, a wine, or a symphony are part of the cultural heritage not only because of their intrinsic aesthetic quality, but also because a series of narratives, shared by an entire community, recognizes such quality. This is why cultural heritage needs to be preserved through its promotion, and perpetuated through its reinvention. New narratives must be produced so that the cultural heritage of Europe

remains symbolically and economically vital. The semiotics of innovation can provide the future generation of cultural heritage professionals with the ability to think anew the way in which cultural patrimony is reframed and reinvented for its future audiences.

This is all the more crucial considering the way in which these audiences are evolving. New types of tourists are increasingly exploring the world's cultural heritage coming from the emerging economies of Asia and Latin America. In most cases, though, the old industry of cultural heritage is unprepared to adapt its offer to these new consumers. New, unprecedented ways of presenting and valorizing the cultural heritage of Europe will be needed in the short term. The deep impact of Judeo-Christianity on the arts and the architecture of the Old Continent, for instance, will have to be explained and communicated to audiences with a completely different religious background. Semiotics, with its characteristic expertise in dealing with innovation as a form of communication, as well as in decoding cultural systems, will be able to suggest ways to implement new creative strategies for the intercultural valorization of artistic heritage. This effort of cultural translation will be required not only to bridge cultures that are distant in space, but also to fill the temporal and sociocultural gap between generations: cultural heritage will have to be presented, explained, valorized, and made commercially profitable also for generations of citizens, visitors, tourists, and consumers with a totally different cultural literacy.

To this regard — and this is the third contribution of the semiotic of innovation to the industry of cultural heritage — the new generations of consumers are less and less interested in a purely cognitive, almost didactic, reception of cultural heritage and are more and more attracted by an experiential relation to it: tourists who visit cities, for instance, do not want simply to know the history of buildings and monuments as if they were the chapters of a book, but experience the characteristic urban flair of cities, eating what locals eat, drink what they drink, participate in their festivals, feeling their attachment and sense of belonging. In order to design a new experiential promotion of cultural heritage, creativity strategies are needed, and the semiotics of innovation is equipped to provide them through the characteristic expertise of semiotics in analyzing meaning and its sensorial manifestations.

Fourth, building on the metaphor of smart phones and the technological values they embody, reflection on 'smartness' is currently thriving in many environments of both research and production. For instance, designing the 'smart cities' of the future is becoming more and more a priority for architects, urban planners, and administrators, meaning by 'smart cities' those that use new ICTs in order to enhance their sustainability. The semiotics of

innovation must cross-fertilize 'smartness studies' with research on cultural heritage and provide training for the design of a 'smart cultural heritage industry'.

The smart reinvention of cultural heritage will develop along several lines. On the one hand, research and implementation of ICTs for the elaboration of new experiential scenarios: more and more, smart phones and other portable technologies will become fundamental interfaces in the experience of the European cultural heritage; future innovation professionals will have to cooperate with engineers and ICT experts in designing such interfaces in order for them to work as both devices of intercultural translation of- and experiential immersion in- cultural heritage. On the other hand, innovating the cultural heritage industry in a smart way will also entail enhancing the sustainability of activities in the field. Tourism and other cultural heritage-based economic sectors produce income and employment, yet they also bring about considerable externalities, such as environmental issues and the consumerist stereotyping of cultural heritage itself. New strategies of cultural heritage promotion will have to deal with risks of both environmental and symbolic hyper-consumption. Semiotics can promote reflection on both risks in new terms, starting from its in-depth knowledge of the mechanisms of 'semiotic pollution' (the symbolic impoverishment of cultural heritage).

Fifth, having in mind the environmental and symbolical risks of cultural heritage mass industry and consumption, innovation professionals in this field will have to design strategies in order to select their audiences and aim at targets of quality cultural consumption, generating profits but minimizing negative externalities. Hence, an imperative requirement of the cultural heritage sector will consist in developing strategies able to tailor its offer to the specific sociocultural, generational, experiential, and technological features of future consumers. Again, the semiotics of innovation is entitled to provide training along this line building on the rich semiotic state of the art concerning the construction of audiences and the predetermination of responses.

Last but not least, reinventing cultural heritage through creative innovation will also have impact on the shaping of cultural identities both locally and globally. Semiotic intercultural awareness will be needed so that cultural heritage is reframed in such a way that enhances communication and economic opportunities while both preserving the specificity of European communities and fostering their mutual interaction. Attention toward sensory experience, reflection on smart sustainability, and intercultural translation are crosscut characteristics of the semiotics of innovation, which will constitute pivotal training lines also in the other activity sectors singled out by the present essay.

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